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ABSTRACT

Acknowledging that one of the most difficult challenges postsecondary educators must face is the maintenance of adequate student enrollment, this paper describes the creation of a speech communication laboratory as one component of a university-wide effort to maximize student retention. The paper first discusses several suggestions researchers have made to enhance student retention in college, then describes the creation of the laboratory. This description includes the laboratory objectives, the faculty involved, and the planning and procedures. Next, the paper describes the procedures for assessing communication apprehensive students in order to plan the appropriate lab services, and gives the results of the assessment questionnaire. The paper concludes with a description of the first year of laboratory operation, and some recommendations for improvement in the operation based on its first-year experience. (HTH)

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CREATING A SPEECH COMMUNICATION LABORATORY IN A UNIVERSITY RETENTION PROGRAM

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CREATING A SPEECH COMMUNICATION LABORATORY IN A UNIVERSITY RETENTION PROGRAM

For years researchers studied college student dropout rates, searched for predictors of attrition, and suggested approaches that colleges could implement to maximize student retention. In their comprehensive summary of 135 studies of college attrition from 1950-1975, Pantages and Creedon (1978) observed that the attrition problem deserves the attention of those in higher education because of the sheer numbers of students involved and their potential negative impact on college survival. Ramist (1981) assessed 50 years of attrition research and identified the suffering endured by both students who drop out and the institutions who lose them. In the past the number of dropouts aroused concern, but there were always other students to take the places of those who left. Today, colleges are facing a significant decline of college age students that the U.S. Census Bureau projects will continue until 1994 (Polichetti, 1984). Educators, cost conscious for survival, are astounded to learn of the financial impact the loss of even a small number of students can have on an institution. For example two years ago at the University of Rhode Island failure of students to return either due to voluntary withdrawal or dismissal cost the University an average of $4900 per student. Since 12% of the 1982-83 freshman class failed to return, the University will lose in excess of $2 million in tuition by 1986 from this single class (URI, 1982-3).

Thus one of the most difficult challenges postsecondary educators must face is the maintenance of adequate student enrollment during a period of declining college cohorts. To meet this challenge colleges have recognized that they must both vigorously recruit potential students and successfully retain those already enrolled. Pantages and Creedon (1978) recommend that

colleges shift their focus from predicting factors that influence attrition to identifying methods that prevent attrition.

This paper describes one component of a university wide effort to maximize student retention in colleges: the creation of a Speech Communication Laboratory.

Several suggestions have been made to enhance student retention in college. They include operating comprehensive freshman orientation programs (Demitroff, 1974), using student peer counselors to supplement professional counseling services (Delworth, Moore, Millick & Leone, 1974), improving publicity of counseling services (Carlson & Wagner, 1965; Gekowski & Schwartz, 1961), providing support services to help students improve time management and study habits (Pantages & Creedon, 1978), increasing faculty-student interaction and creating remedial plans (Ramist, 1981). Many of the suggestions involve upgrading, expanding, and publicizing support networks that are designed to prevent student problems or resolve when they occur. Although no study recommended creation of a Speech Communication Laboratory, the lab described in this paper is consistent with the recommendations cited above and reflects their practical and philosophical orientation.

Ramist (1981) identified basic skill development as a main concern of students. He suggests this concern should be considered in counseling and advising programs to reduce attrition. When the University of Rhode Island asked incoming students to report their perceived skill needs, 47% cited improving public speaking skills, a higher percentage than reported for any other category including study, test-taking, writing, reading, and mathematics skills (URI, 1983). This perceived need is particularly important in view of the University of Rhode Island's liberal education requirements: all students must take at least six credits in English communication skills, and many are urged to take three of these credits in speech (1984-85 Bulletin). Indeed, over 1000 students per year partially fulfill this communication requirement

by taking a public speaking, interpersonal, or speaking and writing basic skills course in speech communication (Arts & Sciences, 1984).

CREATION OF THE SPEECH COMMUNICATION LABORATORY

The Speech Communication Laboratory opened at the University of Rhode Island (URI) in September, 1983. The lab was designed to accomplish the following objectives: 1) to complement the existing support service network offered by the URI Counseling Center, University College, Writing Lab, and Reading Center as part of a university wide effort to maximize retention; 2) to provide for student/faculty interaction outside the formal speech communication classroom; 3) to offer tutorial instruction in public speaking, voice and diction, and help in overcoming anxiety; and 4) to provide student peer feedback on communication skills when a session with an instructor is not available or desired.

The three faculty who provided services in public speaking skills, voice and diction, and overcoming anxiety each donated 2 hours/week to the lab as an addition to their regular work load. The Department of Speech Communication funded and trained an advanced undergraduate student in Speech Communication to provide the peer assistance component for two hours/week and loaned the lab space and equipment (a color video cassette system and a stereo tape recorder).

Publicity notices describing laboratory services were sent to all URI faculty, administrators, and secretaries. Press releases were published in the student campus paper, alumni news, and a faculty-staff information bulletin. Notices were mailed to all campus support service personnel and to each communication skills instructor for possible referrals. The publicity was successful since all lab sessions were booked from the third week of operation.

Each lab session was scheduled for 30 minutes. The first meeting with each student was devoted to needs assessment. A diagnostic session was

considered critical since 90% of the students who applied to the lab were referred by instructors on the basis of a variety of data. Some referrals came from Speech Communication faculty who based their recommendations on paper-and pencil instruments, behavioral cues from students in class assignments, and private conversations with the students. Referrals from instructors in other areas of the university were based on data ranging from poor performance on an assignment to a "gut-level feeling". Students who requested lab services came for several reasons ranging from a desire to improve their skills to anticipation of a difficult assignment. As Page (1978) cautions about communication apprehension laboratories:

> to admit anyone who volunteers or scores at some level on a paper-and-pencil test is irresponsible. If the student happens to have a severe reticence or interpersonal anxiety problem in addition to speech anxiety, desensitization alone will often be unsuccessful, and the consequence of unsuccessful treatment can be devastating. Careful screening interviews are imperative as are referrals for students whose problems are outside the established scope of the programs.

Thus, regardless of the reasons behind a request for services, each student participated in a diagnostic interview for the first session to ensure that future sessions or referrals to other support services were consistent with actual rather than reported student needs.

The diagnostic sessions consisted of an interview, self-report questionnaires, and samples of communication (for the public speaking and voice and diction components). After the diagnostic session was completed, subsequent meetings were tailored to the assessed needs of the individual student.

DATA COLLECTION FOR PLANNING

Since most students at the University of Rhode Island were required to take basic skills courses in communication who might be able to avoid them at other universities, the lab staff wanted to know how many highly communication

apprehensive students were enrolled in the basic skills communication course. McCroskey (1972) reported, using data from the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA), that between 10 and 20 percent of college students enrolled in the basic communication course at Illinois State University had extremely high communication apprehension. Determining the actual number of highly communication apprehensive students became more important in terms of student attrition when the preliminary results of a McCroskey study at West Virginia University were reported in his 1983 SCA convention proposal. McCroskey previewed results from a longitudinal study that indicated students who dropped out during the first semester had significantly higher communication apprehension with respect to interpersonal conversations, group discussions, and talking in meetings than students who remained in school. He also noted those students who had higher communication apprehension and who completed the semester, had significantly lower grade point averages than their more confident peers (McCroskey, 1983).

To plan lab services for communication apprehensive students, the lab staff posed the following questions prior to the lab opening:

1. What percentage of students enrolled in basic speech courses at the University of Rhode Island are highly communication apprehensive?
2. Do students enrolled in interpersonal communication courses score higher on a communication apprehension instrument than those in the public speaking and speaking and writing basic skills courses?
3. Do students majoring in one undergraduate college score higher on a communication apprehension instrument than those in other colleges?
4. Do males score higher on a communication apprehension instrument than females?

PROCEDURE

To answer the planning questions, the PRCA-24 was administered in September, 1983 to the 563 students enrolled in the sections of interpersonal, public speaking, and speaking/writing courses at the University of Rhode Island. Although some students failed to complete each item, all completed sections of questionnaires were included in the analysis. Thus some analyses were performed using data from fewer than 563 students. To simplify the analysis for the variable of undergraduate major, students were grouped according to the college that offered their major concentration. Thus accounting and management majors were both classified under "business."

STATISTICAL ANALYSES

Overall PRCA-24 scores were analyzed in a 2 (Sex) X 4 (Year in School) X 3 (Course) X 6 (Undergraduate major) analysis of variance with adjustments for unequal and disproportionate cell size. The same analysis design was performed on the MEETING, PUBLIC SPEAKING, GROUP DISCUSSION and INTERPERSONAL CONVERSATION PRCA-24 subscores. The criterion for significance of all tests was .05.

RESULTS

Sixty-one or 11% of the college students enrolled in the three basic speech courses could be classified as highly communication apprehensive based on their overall PRCA-24 scores. This percentage is within the range reported by McCroskey (1972). Using the OVERALL PRCA-24 scores, only the variable Undergraduate Major generated a significant F-ratio. Students majoring in Engineering and those who had not decided on a major scored higher on the OVERALL PRCA-24 ($N=528$, $F=3.51$, $P=.002$) than those majoring in other academic programs (See Table 1).

TABLE 1. Cell Means and Standard Deviations by Undergraduate Major for OVERALL PRCA-24 Scores

Major	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Arts & Sciences	133	63.99	14.73
Engineering	40	70.21	13.20
Resource Development	33	66.86	14.62
Business	152	65.07	13.32
Human Science & Services	53	68.54	14.24
Undecided	117	69.85	13.90

Students majoring in Engineering and those who were undecided about a major scored higher on the Group DISCUSSION subscore of the PRCA-24 (N=558, F=2.21, P=.04) than students majoring in other areas (See Table 2). Majors in Arts and Sciences and Business scored lower on the PRCA-24 MEETING subscore (N=550, F=3.35, P=.003) than those students majoring in other concentrations (See Table 3). Engineering majors scored higher on the INTERPERSONAL CONVERSATION PRCA-24 subscore (N=559, F=3.21, P=.004) than students majoring in other fields (See Table 4). Males scored higher on the INTERPERSONAL CONVERSATION PRCA-24 subscore (N=559, F=9.24, P=.003) than females (See Table 5). Females scored higher on the PUBLIC SPEAKING subscore of the PRCA-24 (N=563, F=13.65, P=.0002) than males (See Table 6).

TABLE 2. Cells Means and Standard Deviations by Undergraduate Major for GROUP DISCUSSION PRCA-24 Subscores

Major	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Arts & Sciences	138	14.38	4.44
Engineering	42	15.62	4.16
Resource Development	36	14.92	4.38
Business	158	14.43	4.02
Human Science & Services	58	14.90	3.80
Undecided	123	15.63	4.57

TABLE 3. Cell Means and Standard Deviations by Undergraduate Major for MEETING PRCA-24 Subscores

Major	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Arts & Sciences	138	15.96	4.63
Engineering	41	17.05	3.99
Resource Development	34	17.15	5.07
Business	157	15.91	4.29
Human Science & Services	58	17.34	4.19
Undecided	122	17.54	4.38

TABLE 4. Cell Means and Standard Deviations by Undergraduate Major for INTERPERSONAL CONVERSATION PRCA-24 Subscores

Major	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Arts & Sciences	136	14.12	4.13
Engineering	41	17.05	3.99
Resource Development	34	14.63	3.59
Business	157	14.72	3.87
Human Science & Services	57	14.91	3.98
Undecided	119	15.82	4.29

TABLE 5. Cell Means by Standard Deviations by Sex for the INTERPERSONAL CONVERSATION PRCA-24 Subscore

Sex	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Male	282	15.38	4.05
Female	277	14.68	4.31

TABLE 6. Cell Means and Standard Deviations by Sex for the PUBLIC SPEAKING PRCA-24 Subscore

Sex	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Male	282	19.51	4.63
Female	278	20.96	4.97

DISCUSSION

The most important findings from the PRCA-24 analyses are the higher communication apprehension scores of students in certain academic majors. Ramist (1981) noted that certain academic programs were associated with attrition including Agriculture, Forestry and Conservation (located in the URI College of Resource Development), Physical Education (included in the URI College of Human Science and Services) and Engineering. Therefore it is important to note that URI Engineering students scored higher than other students on the OVERALL, GROUP DISCUSSION, MEETING, and INTERPERSONAL CONVERSATION scores on the PRCA-24. Resource Development and Human Science and Services majors scored higher than many students on the MEETING PRCA-24 subscore. Students undecided about a major are often perceived as less goal oriented than other students, an orientation associated with attrition (Ramist, 1981). It is of concern to note then, that URI undecided students scored higher than many others on the OVERALL, GROUP DISCUSSION and MEETING scores of the PRCA-24. The lab staff decided to publicize the existence of

lab services throughout campus and made certain that advisors and faculty serving those in high risk academic programs in terms of their association with attrition and higher PRCA-24 scores, received complete descriptions of all lab components.

The PRCA-24 results of the variable biological sex simply reinforced earlier findings (McCroskey, Simpson & Richmond, 1982). Males reported more communication apprehension regarding interpersonal conversation and females reported more communication apprehension regarding public speaking; there were no significant differences in overall apprehension. Thus the biological sex findings did not present any particular challenge for laboratory planning.

FIRST YEAR OF LABORATORY OPERATION

The Speech Communication Laboratory was open for eight hours per week during the fall, 1983 semester and 6 hours during the spring of 1984. Laboratory hours were limited due to constraints on faculty time and the budget for funding student peer assistance. A total of 205 tutorial sessions were held during the 1983-84 academic year, serving 70 students for 102.5 hours. Forty-six or 65% of all students served were majoring in Arts and Sciences and Business academic programs. Although other students attending lab sessions came from every college in the university, only 16 or 22.8% were enrolled in academic programs associated with high attrition risk. Since freshmen are most associated with attrition (Ramist, 1981), efforts were made to notify freshmen and their advisors about the lab. Twenty-three or 32% of the lab participants were freshmen.

The most frequently requested lab service was for Overcoming Speech Anxiety (See Table 7). It was obvious that the lab could not service all the requests for Overcoming Speech Anxiety and Voice and Diction sessions. Students who participated in those components attended the lab more often than those served by public speaking and peer assistance programs.

TABLE 7. Distribution of URI Speech Communication Laboratory Services for the 1983-84 academic year

Service	N*	Sessions	Contact Hours
Public Speaking	33	44	22.0
Voice & Diction	15	58	29.0
Overcoming Speech Anxiety	30	95	47.3
Student Peer Assistance	13	17	8.5

* Some students attended more than one service. The total number of individual students served was 70.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1) Department, college, university, or external support is essential to assist a lab of this nature to begin operation and to meet the requests for student services. In view of the savings if just one student is encouraged to remain in school ($4900 at the University of Rhode Island), the lab is a good investment. The first year of lab operation at URI focused primarily on service delivery rather than formal assessments of success. Informal student and faculty reports, however, indicated that the lab contributed to university retention efforts. This year it is imperative to objectively measure the impact of lab services on attrition. If it can be demonstrated that the lab does maximize retention, as anecdotal reports indicate, applications for funding will be more successful. Ideally funding should support at least one faculty member for one third released time from other duties, student assistance, supplies, space, and equipment. After space is allocated and equipment is purchased, the largest continuing expense would be in personnel.

2) A careful needs assessment must be conducted for each student and the subsequent laboratory, "...treatment should correlate with the needs of students who enroll in these programs (Neer, 1982, p. 209)."

3) Publicity is imperative that will inform the entire student population to be served, faculty advisors, and those personnel in other campus support services that might be involved in referrals to and from the lab. Student groups associated with attrition risk should receive special attention and priority for services.

CONCLUSION

Now that colleges and universities are searching for methods to prevent attrition, speech communication faculty have a potentially important role to play outside the classroom in speech communication laboratories. There are numerous programs available for treating communication apprehension (Neer, 1982). The lab described in this paper includes work on basic voice, diction, and public speaking skills, provides student peer assistance, and helps students to overcome anxiety.

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